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Commencement Address

Kent Syverud
Syracuse University

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Syracuse University

Remarks by Chancellor Kent Syverud

Delivered on Sunday, May 13, 2018

Location: Dome

Remarks: Commencement Address

*The Chancellor was introduced by Vice Chancellor and Provost,
Dr. Michele Wheatly*

Welcome graduates, faculty, staff, alumni, family, friends, trustees.

Welcome to the 2018 Syracuse University Commencement.

After I speak, you will hear remarks by the President of State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry, my friend, Quentin Wheeler.

This is a happy day. Today, we are conferring more than 7,000 degrees. These degrees are awarded to students from 137 nations in 39 different degree programs. You are the largest graduating class in our history.

Each of you who is graduating today is unique. Each of you got here because of your own hard work. Each of you who are graduating today also got here because of so many who have faith in you.

Some of those people who have faith in you—your faculty, and the staff—are sitting in front of you and working all around this Dome and outside it. Some of the people who support you and have faith in you—friends and family and classmates—are right behind you and next to you, where once again, as always, they have your back.

Some of the people who have supported you are watching this ceremony through the webcast from all over the world.

I thank every single one of them. I think every person, here among us, or around the world, who helped each of you arrive at this glorious day.

And I thank all of the dedicated faculty, staff, alumni, and trustees who have given their hearts and souls for this place and especially for the students in it. These are people who are there when you need them. There are so many such people here today to the great blessing of the University.

I particularly thank and acknowledge two of them today. One is a Provost Faculty Fellow, Professor & Chair in the Public Relations department at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. She moving on to a deanship in North Carolina. Would Rochelle Ford please stand and be thanked.

Another is Associate Provost for Academic Affairs, who has ably led in the Provost's office and in various roles the School of Information Studies for more than 15 years, including as interim Dean. This summer, Associate Provost Jeff Stanton returns to the full-time faculty. Would Jeff Stanton stand and be thanked.

Graduates, as you complete your studies at Syracuse today, I ask you to remember what this community of students, faculty, staff, and alumni can be when it is at its best. At our best, Syracuse University gives all kinds of people a chance – a chance to learn, a chance to grow as a person, and a chance to lead in the world.

Not that many years ago, a Syracuse University alumnus who was a librarian passed away at age 89.

He was a transfer student to Syracuse University. He was a patriotic American citizen. He graduated at the top of his high school class and was a student at the University of California at Berkeley.

He was a junior on December 7, 1941, when the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. Because Warren Tsunesihi was of Japanese descent, he and his family, like thousands of others in the Western States, were rounded up and incarcerated in camps. In the camps there was no opportunity to attend college.

The Society of Friends, the Quakers, wrote to almost every college in the eastern half of the United States. They asked each college to take a handful of these interned college students, so that they could get out of the camps and complete their studies. Most colleges said no. Most of the great public and private research universities said no. The hostility against anyone who was of Japanese descent was just too great.

The Quakers wired the Chancellor of Syracuse University, William Pearson Tolley. They asked him if Syracuse University would accept five students. The Chancellor wired back, in one hour. Chancellor Tolley said that your University – Syracuse University – would accept 100 students and would give each one a full scholarship.

Chancellor Tolley was bitterly criticized for this decision by the media. The Chancellor responded calmly that our country would live to regret what it had done to Japanese Americans. He said that giving excellent students like these a chance was what Syracuse University was all about.

Syracuse enrolled scores of Japanese Americans starting in 1942. One of them was that transfer student from Berkeley, Warren Tsunesihi. Tsunesihi went on to become decorated with the Bronze Star for his service in the United States Army in the Pacific, Japan, and Korea. He then earned a doctorate from Yale University. He became a librarian. He led in the Library of Congress, in Washington D.C., for almost 30 years, ending his career as Chief of the Asia Division.

To those of you about to receive degrees today, I say: May you have the fortitude and commitment and inspiration of Syracuse graduate Warren Tsunesihi. May you overcome whatever obstacles life puts in your path just as you have overcome them here. May you be a blessing to the world. And please, may our country and this University, our University, continue to embrace you and welcome you, and students like you, wherever you have come from and wherever you may go.

To all members of the class of 2018, graduate and undergraduate, I say thank you, on behalf of all of us on the faculty, all the staff, all the alumni, and all in the community. You have done wondrous things here. You will do marvelous things in the future. Please aim high.

And always go orange.

Thank you.

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